

# THE STORY OF JOSEPH KELLER

By THE REV. ELI KELLER, D.D.

Remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations: Ask thy father, and he will show thee: Thy Elders, and they will tell thee—Deut. 32, 7.

THE FIRST commandment, with a promise annexed, is that we shall honor our father and mother. This includes that we should hold in thankful remembrance our parents and ancestors. Hence it seems to me to be quite appropriate to write down here the history of one of my ancestors, with which I have become acquainted, partly through the narratives of parents and friends, and partly through written documents.

In the year 1738 my ancestors were living in the city of Zweibruecken, in the Palatinate, Germany. This is near the border of France, and sometimes known by its French name, Deux Ponts. Originally our family was of Swiss descent; but in the time of the black plague, they, with many other Swiss, emigrated and found a pleasant home in this city. The clear waters of mountain streams flowed from thousands of springs in the Hardt mountains down into the Moselle. Nor was there any lack of honest employment. But Germany then was not united as now, but split up into provinces, and in fact lay under the feet of proud France. This was under the rule of the celebrated but vicious Louis XIV. Of this king Dittmar says, in his history of the world: "Arbitrary government, regardless of consequences, gross sensuality, astonishing and dissolute extravagance, and a greed for notoriety, went out from the French court, and infected many German princes also. This brought much sorrow upon German lands; but what was worse, Louis was driven by his ambition to bring that beautiful borderland, the Palatinate, under his power. His generals ravaged the defenceless land with barbaric fury."

Then it was that necessity drove many to emigrate; and among them **Joseph Keller**, with an older brother, and with a half-brother named Guth, also concluded to go to America. Of this land they had heard that there was to be found a good soil, freedom, and an abundance of food. At that time Joseph was but 19 years of age. His father had been of the Catholic faith, but his mother belonged to the Reformed Church, and had piously trained her son in the doctrines and duties as set forth by this confession.

## Joseph Keller Arrives at Baltimore

In the year 1738 these wanderers arrived safely in America landing at Baltimore, Maryland after a long and tiresome voyage. Although in a strange land, without any acquaintances or relatives, the brothers were compelled to separate at the very start, in order to obtain a support. The oldest brother took his way to Virginia, and it was 40 long years before Joseph again heard a word from him. There were then no such postal arrangements as now. The way in which he heard of him again happened in this manner. In the year 1778, during the War of Independence, while Washington and his army lay at New Brunswick, N.J., Joseph, with many of his neighbors, visited the camp, and on one occasion when the roll was called he heard the name of Keller called out. This induced him to make an investigation, and he found that this Keller was his brother's son, and that he was one of the secretaries of Washington. This unexpected meeting was a source of great joy; but unfortunately the acquaintance could not be further prosecuted then, because the times were troublous, and the mail arrangements very defective.

Thus separated from his older brother, he had for a companion only his half-brother Guth. These two remained and labored in Pennsylvania until the year 1743, at which time, by means of hard toil, Joseph had earned so much, that he felt able to lay the foundations of a family of his own, and to secure the land for a farm. In entering upon the state of matrimony, as an active and industrious young man, he could no doubt have found a life-companion in America also, but his heart went back to the Palatinate, and sought out a daughter of his people, a friend of his youth, whom he had learned to know and love in his old home.

## His Palatine Sweetheart Comes to America

Her name was Maria Engel Drumm, born in Annweiler, a village of the Palatinate. She followed him to America as soon as she could find an opportunity to do so in the company of friends. Possibly he may have written her and described to her the new home in America as a land where no French border incursions and no forced military service were to be found; where no officials, in imitation of the French, oppressed the common people; where no one was compelled to pull off his hat in the presence of the proud nobles; and where no mocker made sport of the Heidelberg catechism. It was a

free, open land, with fine game in the forests and an abundance of fish in the numerous waters. True, the Indians carried on their depredations as yet, here and there, and the land was mostly uncleared and unsettled; but such things were not a terror to his stout heart and strong arms, but rather an incentive to activity. And now having met in this land, they pushed forward with the newer region, long the Blue Ridge of Pennsylvania, where there was yet plenty of land to be obtained.

## Joseph and Maria Settle in Northampton County

From the region now known as Lehigh County they went northeast to what was later known as Plainfield Township in Northampton County, Pa. They settled at a place two miles from the Blue Mountains, where Martin's Creek, a clear mountain stream, passes on its way to the Delaware River. The first shelter they found in their new home was under a large oak tree, near by a strong spring. The Blue Mountains, with their rocks, springs, and woods, became in their eyes a second Haardt; the mountain stream was for them their native Saar; the Martin Creek was the Moselle, and the Delaware the Rhine. There was no lack of all sorts of game—deer, rabbits, pigeons and pheasants. Fish also abounded in the streams, especially the famous speckled trout. Whortleberries were superabundant. The clear atmosphere was promotive of health, and timber for the erection of buildings was everywhere. A few neighbors had also moved in, and there was the beginning of a settlement. No one looked with anxious eyes upon the newcomers. They were received with the greatest of kindness. In later years they often recalled with joy how this neighborly kindness manifested itself, not alone in words, but in numerous acts of love. Now the bright axes were laid at the trunks of the chestnut and the hickory, and the cabin of peace was soon built.

## Many Years They Live in Peace and Prosperity

Prosperity dwelt beneath their roof, and the blessings of Heaven rested upon them. The old Bible and the Hymn Book, which they had brought with them from Germany, are lying before me as I write. Out of this book they sang, in the cabin under the shadows of the Blue Mountains the same hymns and tunes which they had sung in the Haardt mountains, and on church occasions they used the same forms as there; the youth were instructed in the same doctrines, so that the young as well as the old might learn to know that they were Reformed Christians.

Thus the Keller family lived in peace and quietness for 15 years and rejoiced in the rich blessings of God. The bottomland was gradually transformed into beautiful meadows; the high lands into fields for grain. The family grew in numbers, and the whole neighborhood became more thickly settled. In the old Bible before me are recorded the names of seven children, six sons and one daughter. No father need be ashamed to enter such a record in his Bible. Over the door of such a house we might well write in golden letters the words of the Psalmist: "For thou shalt eat the labor of thy hands; happy shalt thou be, and it shall be well with thee. Thy wife shall be as a fruitful vine by the sides of thine house; thy children like olive plants round about thy table." — Ps. 128: 2, 3.

In the fields they cultivated rye, buckwheat, Indian corn, oats and potatoes; in the well-kept garden were cabbage, turnips, cucumbers, radishes, beans, lettuce and onions. The finest of flax was raised carefully cleaned, and then spun and often woven at home; of cotton nothing was known at that time. In this way too they prepared their own woolen garments for use in the winter seasons. Then the clothes cost far more labor, but less money than now; they were not so fine and bright looking, but more durable. For felling the trees they used the axe; for threshing, the flail; for the harvest, the sickle. There was no lack of work, nor of good appetite and sound sleep.

## Now Dark Clouds Begin to Gather

But now dark clouds began to gather over the heads of this prosperous and happy family. The French and Indian War broke loose. The question that lay at the bottom of this was as to whether France or England should rule North America. England possessed the colonies that stretched along the Atlantic coast, as far back as to the Allegheny Mountains. But France had Canada, the Northwest, the control of the great Mississippi, and Louisiana. Be-

## TO THE READER

The story of Joseph Keller in today's Eck was published in the Almanac for the Reformed Church in the year 1880. It was written by the Rev. Eli Keller, great-grandson of Joseph Keller. After a distinguished career in the ministry of the Reformed Church (now the United Church of Christ) Eli Keller retired to Allentown, Pa. where he died in 1919 in his 95th year. He had endeared himself to many through his wide interest in the history, lore and dialect of the Pennsylvania Germans. Some of his dialect poems have appeared in earlier issues of the Eck. We shall in the near future give a fuller account of the life and work of Eli Keller. — Ed.

cause the French devoted themselves mainly to the trade in furs, and paid little attention to agriculture, therefore most of the Indians sided with them, and the settlers on the border were greatly subject to their hostility and fearfully murderous raids. In these dark clouds the lightning played constantly and the thunder rolled heavily; not alone in the distance, but here and there lightning strokes fell on the settlers in their homes.

It was on the 15th of September, 1757, that the unsuspecting Keller family by the Blue Mountains was suddenly overwhelmed. It took place in the afternoon. Joseph Keller, the father, was at that time in a distant field, engaged in plowing. After having fed and watered the horses at noon, he had taken two of his children with him, going joyfully to his work which was the preparation of his field for seeding. Another son, Simon, had been sent into a clearing in the woods to drive away the wild pigeons from the newly sown field. The mother, with the two smaller children in the house and the babe in the cradle, was engaged in her household work.

In that region, as soon as the sun sinks behind the Blue Mountains the ploughman usually regards it as time to stop and return home. But in seeding time he may think it best to go round his field a few times more, in order to complete his work. So on this day Joseph Keller had continued his work longer than usual, and returned late in the evening, tired and weary. Arriving at the house, he at once noticed a very unusual silence. He did not, as at other times, hear the voices of the children and their joyful greetings. He saw nothing of the usual signs of an evening meal in preparation. No smoke ascended from the chimney. Only the loud crying of the babe in the cradle met him. Fear and dread overwhelmed him. He searched through the whole house and finds no one. He hurries to the barn, but only an empty echo answers to his call. The two children whom he had brought with himself from the field, and Simon, who had returned from his pigeon hunt, gather in tears about him. Where are the rest? Where possibly can the mother be? Is not this the season for going after wild grapes, plums or whortleberries? Is not this perhaps the time to make a visit to a neighbor? He leaves the children in the house and hurries to the nearest neighbor. No one of his family is there. The neighbors accompany him home. They call aloud, and search in every direction. Suddenly they see something lying on the ground, and hasten to it. Alas it is a bloody corpse, lying in the field, the corpse of Christian, the eldest son. He has been pierced through with a spear, and his scalp has been torn from his head! It is plain that he was attempting to escape, and was brought down to the ground in his flight. This at once explained a great deal: Indians had been there and had murdered the rest also, or had carried them away as captives. This conclusion was at once reached.

But what now is to be done? The night has already fallen, and, in searching for them, what direction was to be taken? O, woe and misery! All the neighbors hasten to the scene, and soon there are plenty of well-loaded weapons standing in the corner. The whole night is consumed in discussing plans, but what can it all avail? There lay the bloody body of Christian, who had fallen a prey to the treacherous enemy—but alas! where were the rest of the family?

At the break of day Christian was buried not far from the spot where he had fallen. The whole region round was searched, far and wide, but all in vain! Joseph Keller was overwhelmed with his misfortunes. He could well say, with Job: "Oh, that my grief were thoroughly weighed, and my calamity laid in the balances together! For now it would be heavier than the sand of the sea." (Job 6:2, 3). With the same Job he could sigh: "Oh that I were as in months past, as in the days when God preserved me!" (Job 29:2).

(To Be Concluded)

# THE STORY OF JOSEPH KELLER

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(Conclusion)

## Between Hope and Fear

If all had been murdered the anxiety would not have been so great. But as they had entirely disappeared without the slightest trace, the heart was all the time alternating between hope and fear. Every sound, by day or night, agitated his heart. Ah! how many tears fell to the ground, and how many sighs and prayers ascended to heaven!

At this time the French had gathered their main forces in Canada, especially in Montreal and Quebec. From these places as centres, they managed their raids. There, too, the Indians friendly to them were gathered without however forming any permanent settlement. As usual with these savages, they would start from one of these places, at one time in the year going over mountains and valleys to hunt, at another season, along the streams for fishing. In this way all the streams and mountains of Pennsylvania were often visited by them, and were well known to them. The town of Easton, where the Lehigh and the Bushkill fall into the Delaware, was formerly one of their chief places of gathering. Hither they often came also in their trading expeditions, when they had skins and pelts to sell. In this way they had the best of opportunities to become acquainted with the habits of the frontier settlers. Many an hour did they pass in looking down from the mountains upon the white people laboring in the valleys, conscious of the presence of their spies. When the Indians learned that the French were desirous of securing prisoners, the thought naturally arose in their minds to capture as many of the whites as possible. It was in this way that the Keller family, with its active boys, attracted the attention of some wandering Indians; for the whole surroundings were such as to favor the execution of such a robbery.

Whoever passes from the Plainfield church, northeast about two miles, on the way to the village of Bangor, will come to a conical hill. On the right, opposite the hill, was the Keller home. On the left, behind the hill, Joseph Keller had been engaged in ploughing. When he went out in the morning to his ploughing, he was wont not to return until noon, unless a horn was blown, or a child came with a message. So also in the afternoon, Keller was a fearless and courageous man, who might have given the savages a terrible reception, but under the present circumstances there was no cause for fear. The mother of the family was also unusually strong, and had a strong voice, so as scarcely to need a horn usually in calling her husband. But over this hill the voice could not penetrate, and what could a solitary woman do in the persence of the savages? The Indians had marked all this, and well knew that if they could rush upon them in the afternoon, nothing could be discovered of their raid until night, and that the pursuit could not possibly be entered upon then. For the woman, as a strong worker, they could expect a good price from the French. They acted in accordance with these cunningly laid plans, and were successful.

As the wolves, in the neighborhood of the quietly feeding sheep, crouching in the thickets, feed their eyes for a time upon their prey, until the right moment arrives, and then suddenly, with all their strength, rush forth to carry out their bloody work, so was it in this case also. Before the unfortunate family knew of its danger, it was overpowered and made helpless. It was not the object of the Indians to murder them; they also avoided setting the house on fire, else their raid might have been discovered too early, and their flight might have been cut off. Nor had they probably intended to kill Christian. As a prisoner he would have been of more value to them than his scalp. But no doubt he tried to escape from them, and was too fleet to be overtaken by them. All else turned out according to their plans, and Maria Engel Keller, with her two sons, Joseph and Jacob, aged respectively three and six years, was now in all haste hurried over mountain and valley, on the way to Montreal in Canada. The first night they halted at a place about 12 miles distant, known as Cherry Valley. The night was beautiful and cool, and a fire was kindled. Scarcely had the flames commenced to arise, when an Indian drew forth the scalp of Christian and dried it at the fire. The mother recognized it by its blonde hair, and a stab went through her bleeding mother-heart. It is easy to understand what a night of terror she must have passed, and that no sleep visited her eyes. Then followed the long and hurried march of 400 miles. She was often so exhausted that an

Indian would place his weapon against her back to urge her along. Often she believed that in the end the Indians would kill her in order to get rid of her. Still, Canada was finally reached, and the mother was sold to a French officer.

## Prisoners in Canada

But Canada was finally reached and the mother was sold to a French officer. The boys were taken from her, and she was now alone in her misery. Joseph was adopted into an Indian family. A young Indian had died and his sister adopted Joseph in his stead. This saved his life. What became of the other boy will only be known in eternity: nothing was ever heard of him. The situation of the mother in her servitude was not unendurable so far as the outward life was concerned. Joseph also was treated with a great deal of respect and affection by the savages, and soon became accustomed to the free, but often hard life of nature.

## Anxiety at Home

But of all this not a word was known at home. The Indians were very careful not to drop a hint concerning it, although they often returned at a later period to that neighborhood, and from out of the mountain retreats observed the movements of the settlers. They noticed that the affrighted people were building themselves a blockhouse, or fort, of huge logs, in order to save themselves from future raids. The spot where this was erected was about one mile east of the Plainfield church, near a large spring, where at present Jacob Root is living. Into this building they brought the women and children for the day for safety. At night all the people of the whole neighborhood assembled there; in the daytime the men were engaged in their labors.

One evening the larger girls were more than usually noisy, and in order to bring them to quiet, they were locked out for a time from the building, when naturally enough they were filled with fright until they were again admitted. Another evening the men were engaged in shooting at a mark. This was affixed to a tree, and one of the men shot so low that he hit the roots of the tree. This caused great laughter, as sharp shooting was then necessary, but the poor marksman defended himself by affirming that a shot in the feet of the enemy was not to be despised.

One evening, at twilight, several men stood before the fort and were gazing around. One said: "Over there, in the bottom, I saw something move. I believe it was an Indian." The others laughed and said he must have been a ghost. He said: "A shot will be a good thing. I will fire at the spot." The others rejoined: "You cannot hit at this distance." He delivered his shot, and nothing further was heard. But in Canada the Indians related in the presence of mother Keller that in the fort down there in the Blue Mountains must be a good marksman, for one of their number was on that very day nearly hit when at a great distance.

Joseph Keller also experienced how constantly the Indians were in his immediate neighborhood. For one evening, after concluding his work in his house and barn, he was already a good distance on his way to the fort, when something occurred to him which he wished still to do, and he again returned to the house. When he came near, he saw that there were Indians in it. He thought it too venture some to attack them alone, and hurried to the fort for help to capture them. But when they entered the house, the savages were all gone. But they had taken with them all his tobacco, which he had raised himself, and hung under the roof to dry. This worried him for a long time. He often said that, if he had only attacked them when he saw them, alone as he was, some of them would certainly have remained behind.

## The Years Passed

Thus passed three eventful, disturbed years. In the meantime the English had been greatly successful as over against the French, and in these contests our forefathers, the colonists, rendered great services. The fortified city of Montreal, although surrounded with high walls, and a ditch eight feet deep, and placed under the special protection of the Virgin Mary, could not withstand them. With the aid of the God of Abraham, the English under General Wolff stormed the "Heights of Abraham", took the city of Quebec, and cooped up the French commander Vandreuil in Montreal. On the 6th of September, 1760, nearly 10,000 British troops advanced against the city, and two days later Montreal, with the whole of Canada, fell into their possession. All prisoners were at once released.

## Home Again

At this time the farmers of

We are not born as the partridge in the wood, or the ostrich of the desert, to be scattered everywhere; but we are to be grouped together, and brooded by love, and reared day by day in that first of churches, the family.

—Henry Ward Beecher

upper Pennsylvania were wont to bring all their farm produce by wagon to Philadelphia, a distance of 60 miles. Joseph Keller was on his way to market, in the neighborhood of Philadelphia, when he heard the news that the prisoners were released; and this took such possession of his heart, and filled him with such hope, that he at once unhitched his team, allowing the loaded wagon to stand, and rode back home with all speed. And when he arrived at his house, behold! his beloved wife had returned. Ah! what a meeting that must have been! How must the children have gazed upon the mother, and how must the mother have embraced the children before the arrival of the father! How much there must have been to relate on both sides! True, Christian was dead and buried, and the two younger ones had not yet been found, but the mother was now restored, and there was hope that the two boys might again be found. In the family Bible the father wrote with trembling hands: "My wife came back, anno, 1760, on the 20th of October, but of my boys I have as yet heard nothing."

Two years later another entry was made in the same Bible: "Philip, born the 29th of March, 1763." This was my grandfather (Eli Keller is writing this narrative.—Ed.), whom as a youth I often visited. Each time, on leaving him, he gave me a quarter of a dollar as a present. Had I been as observant then as now, I might have heard from him many traditions from the older times. With the older brother, Simon, I also became well acquainted. He often visited our house, and each time was presented by our mother with German cheese, of which he was very fond.

A few years after the birth of Philip the parents had the great joy of welcoming the return of Joseph, after his seven years captivity and detention in Canada. He had passed this whole period with the Indians, and in his feelings and habits had become like one of them. With the bow and arrow he was very skillful. The Indians had not yet allowed him a gun, but had promised him that the next year he should have one, and his desire for it was so great that at first he did not wish to return home. Gradually, however, he accustomed himself again to a civilized life. He was, however, always very fond of hunting, in which he easily took all sorts of game. Often he would seat himself under a tree, in a thicket, and allure all sorts of birds to him, in order to catch them, for he could imitate the cry of every kind of bird. He was also fond of playing jokes on his acquaintances, without injuring them. One day he called out to a friend at a great distance whether he might shoot an arrow at him. This one, believing it impossible to shoot so far, gave permission. But the arrow whirled so near his ear that he afterwards took good care not to give such a permission a second time.

The other boy never returned home.

It was not long now until the War of Independence began. Margaretha, the only daughter married a Mr. Miller, who served as captain under General Washington. He met with the sad misfortune that his wife and only child died while he was absent in the war. Both lie buried in the Plainfield graveyard. The inscriptions have long since become illegible, but in the stone that marks the resting place of the daughter is a hole filled with lead, in which was once fastened a crown as an ornament. Joseph also served in the Revolutionary War. The other son, John Jacob, had a son who became a minister of the Reformed Church, and died in the State of New York in the year 1852.

The two pioneer parents, Joseph and Maria Keller, lived to a venerable age. The father died at the age of 81, the mother lived to be 83. They were well and widely known for their piety. As long as she lived the mother always kept the day of her deliverance from captivity as a day of prayer and thanksgiving, which she kept strictly also as a fast-day, doing entirely without food. Both of them served God through their whole lives, remembering the severe sufferings through which they had passed, and which left ineffaceable traces in their countenances and in their hearts. But they did not forget their gratitude for the great blessings which were also vouchsafed to them.

(The reader will remember that Eli Keller was the great-grandson of the pioneer Joseph Keller. The above narrative appeared in German in the Reformed Church Almanac for 1880.—Ed.)